DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 407 306 SO 026 906

AUTHOR Young, Michelle D.
TITLE Understanding Family Involvement in Secondary Schools: Lessons Learned from Texas Borderland Schools.
PUB DATE 96
NOTE 30p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association in (New York, NY, 8-12 April 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Family Involvement; Family Role; *Limited English Speaking; *Migrant Youth; Migrants; Parent Participation; *Parent School Relationship; Poverty; *School Community Relationship; *Secondary Education
IDENTIFIERS *Texas

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the involvement of Mexican-American parents in secondary schools located along the Texas-Mexico border. The study is directed toward strengthening parental involvement in school communities where cultural and linguistic diversity, poverty, mobility, and lack of English proficiency present challenges to both school staff and parents. The paper examines the ways in which successful schools, particularly those enrolling predominantly Mexican-American students from poor, limited English proficient, non-English speaking, and/or migrant backgrounds, develop and sustain meaningful parental involvement. The principal assumption guiding the study is that effective border schools have developed contextually specific means for reaching out to families, for gaining their support and involvement, and for forming partnerships that support the education of their children. Contains 16 references. (EH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 407 306

Understanding Family Involvement in Secondary Schools: Lessons Learned from Texas Borderland Schools

by

Michelle D. Young

The University of Texas at Austin

Paper presented at the
Annual Meeting of the
American Educational Research Association

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Michelle D. Young

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Direct Correspondence to:

Michelle D. Young
SZB 310
Department of Educational Administration
The University of Texas
Austin, Texas 78712-1291
mdyoung@tenet.edu

RUNNING HEAD: Involvement in Secondary Schools

S0026906

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Understanding Family Involvement in Secondary Schools: Lessons Learned from Texas Borderland Schools

The Study

A growing body of evidence has emerged suggesting that involving parents in the educational process enhances school success. As a result, educators and educational policy makers have begun shifting and broadening the focus of their search for new ideas and resources to include family members. Educational researchers have also given increased emphasis to the role of the family in education. Thus far, however, family involvement research has not fully explored how race, ethnicity, and cultural factors influence the expression of parental involvement in different community contexts. Given the increasing number of Mexican-American families in such states as Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California, it is important that the interpretations, expectations, and involvement experiences of these families as well as those of the school staff who work with them are considered carefully. Doing so will contribute greatly to understanding the role of Mexican-American parents in the educational process. Similarly, while the involvement of parents at the elementary level is well documented, few have given careful consideration to the involvement of parents in secondary schools. Secondary schools differ from elementary schools in a number of important ways, and one result of these differences is the dramatic change in the nature of parental involvement. This paper addresses both of these heretofore neglected areas. It provides a portrait of the involvement of Mexican-American parents in secondary schools located along the Texas-Mexico border.

This study was conducted as part of the Effective Border Schools Research and Development Initiative (EBSRDI), a collaborative project between the University of Texas and the Region 1 Service Center and School Districts of Texas. The EBSRDI attempted to identify the best educational practices used in borderland schools that lead to high achievement among their students. This particular study is directed toward strengthening parental involvement in school communities where cultural and linguistic diversity, poverty, mobility, and lack of English proficiency present challenges to both school staff and parents. It examines the ways in which successful schools--particularly those enrolling predominantly Mexican-American students from poor, limited English proficient, non-English speaking, and/or migrant backgrounds--develop and sustain meaningful parental involvement.

The principal assumption guiding this study is that effective border schools have developed contextually specific means for reaching out to families, for gaining their support and involvement, and for forming partnerships that support the education of their children. The study has proceeded through a number of steps. The first phase involved an extensive review of the literature. On the basis of this review and the intent of the study, a design for the field research was developed and research and interview questions were generated and revised. During this time, schools to be included in the study were selected and initial contact was made. Pilot studies were then undertaken in two of the selected schools,

and based on the data collected through this effort, revisions were made to the interview protocols. Subsequently, we visited each of the focus schools, made observations, and interviewed teachers, administrators, other school staff members, and parents. Following the field work stage, teams began the process of data analysis, interpretation, and writing.

Research Methods and Design

The study was primarily qualitative in nature. Quantitative research approaches are limited in their ability to cope with the complexities of relationships and interactions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). Consequently, researchers have suggested that qualitative methods be used to enhance and expand the existing knowledge base, particularly for meeting the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse populations (Anderson, 1993; Baker, 1983; Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Marín & Marín, 1991). The process is cyclical in nature, juxtaposing personal observation and interviewing with theory and reflection (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Patton, 1990).

Qualitative research methods enable the researcher to study a number of phenomena in order to understand individual actors' perceptions of events that take place in their school and community (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Relevant to the purpose of this study, researchers can (a) examine the activities and types of interactions that occur in naturally occurring and integrated community contexts; (b) describe the daily realities and experiences of parents in various areas of the school; (c) improve the validity of programs in the school; and (d) develop practices that foster the involvement of parents and, thus, the academic achievement of linguistically and culturally diverse students.

To ensure robustness in the results of the study, a variety of research methods and data sources were utilized. In addition to the extensive literature review, these included: 1) a survey component targeting best practices used by teachers to develop and sustain family involvement and family school partnerships; 2) campus site visits focusing on understanding the nature of parental involvement and the activities that support involvement and on developing an overall representation of the school culture, operation and climate; and 3) review of school and district documents concerning parental involvement.

The Findings

Parent involvement, as a practice and a concept, is affect by a multitude of complex phenomena. These aspects include, to name only a few, grade level, practices, belief systems, culture, feelings, relationships, resources, and values. Thus, each individual, each school, and each community is likely to have a distinct understanding of parental involvement, a unique way of encouraging involvement or being involved, and a diverse set of rationales that connote why they feel involvement is or is not important. Accordingly, findings reveal obvious commonalities, contradictions, and uniquenesses among the parents, school staff, and parental involvement programs in the borderland schools.

This paper describes those elements, shared and unshared, that reveal the distinctiveness of parental involvement in borderland secondary schools. Through the data analysis process, answers to three basic questions emerged, answers reflecting how members of these school communities conceptualize and experience parental involvement, why they value it, and what it looks like in practice.

The remainder of this paper is divided into three sections. The first provides a description of the nature of parental involvement in the borderland schools included in the study, specifically, how parental involvement is viewed and why it is valued. The second section describes the practices that facilitate parental involvement in these schools. The third and concluding section discusses how the findings from this study relate to the existing research on parental involvement.

Views of Parental Involvement

Parental involvement[1] is a rather complicated concept. There is no agreed upon definition that includes or excludes all the elements asserted by different actors. Similarly, there is a lack of agreement regarding the reasons for supporting and/or valuing involvement. These differences in perspective and opinion are most clearly represented by two groups: parents and teachers. For example, in this study, parents tend to emphasize more informal involvement activities. When formal activities are mentioned the reasons given, tend to differ from those provided by school staff. For instance, parent rationales are typically less tangible and focus primarily on relationship and environmental factors. In this section, we present the views of both parents and school staff concerning what they believe parental involvement is, and why they believe it is important.

Parental Views

Like at the elementary level, there are two general domains into which participants categorize involvement: formal or informal. However, unlike the elementary level, informal activities are of greater concern. This focus on informal involvement is related to at least four pertinent factors. At the secondary level, fewer opportunities are available to parents to become meaningfully involved at the school. Similarly, as children grow older, mothers are more likely to seek employment and, thus, have difficulty attending meetings sponsored by the school, especially during the day. Further, in many of the communities that were visited, public transportation systems are nonexistent for parents to use to get to the school. Many of the families rely on a single automobile, and it is primarily used by the father. The majority of the mothers who do participate at the school either walk, or take taxicabs to get there. Therefore, participating in volunteer work at the school requires inordinate effort on the part of many

---

[1] Parent involvement in borderland school communities often includes the participation of the extended family and sometimes even neighbors and friends who share a concern for the welfare for a particular student. Thus, this discussion uses concepts of parent and family interchangeably inclusive of all individuals within the family circle who advocate for the welfare of the student.

parents. Finally, many parents limit the amount of contact they have with the school because they feel their children wish them to.

Interviews became animated when mothers began to talk about the informal things they did for their children. Parents described practices such as getting to know their children's friends, instilling cultural values, monitoring homework, obtaining tutorial assistance, and talking with children about school and their futures. Another prevalent activity that emerged from the interviews was the importance of teaching their children how to be responsible for themselves and their actions. For example, one mother talked of instilling the value of "owning up to mistakes" and "assuming responsibility for consequences." Another important component for mothers is the importance of maintaining a "home" for their families. It is important for these mothers to be at home when their children are dismissed from school. Safety is an issue, but more important is the value placed on care giving. Their roles as mothers and their everyday activities are viewed as important aspects in supporting school success.

Regardless of the barriers to formal involvement, the parents that were interviewed are all engaged in some volunteer capacity in the schools. They are responsible for a diverse array of activities, including monitoring the hall ways, volunteering in the special education classroom, making copies, decorations, or classroom materials in the parent centers, and holding various leadership positions. When asked why they are involved, parents listed a number of reasons. These include: supporting the development of their children, building and strengthening relationships with teachers and other parents, enhancing the school environment, maintaining relationships with their children, providing good role models for their children, and enriching their own lives.

Supporting the Development of their Children

All parents described their involvement as expressions of concern, love, or as a means for being watchful over their children. One mother shared a story of how she overcame her own fear of the school and teachers out of love for her children. She was intimidated by the professional nature of the school and her children's teachers but recognized the importance of being involved as a way to help her own children. With the support of the parent specialist, this mother has managed to overcome her fears.

About half of the parents said they are involved as school volunteers because they are concerned about their children's academic progress. They see involvement as a way to monitor their children's school progress and to establish a working relationship with teachers. For example, one parent, whose son is in special education, sees her involvement as a way to make sure that teachers read his file, know his capabilities, and understand that she will be watching out for his best interest.

> I could tell at home he was having a hard time with his homework, and I requested an ARD meeting to have him tested. . . . I have to say that years back, I met with a brick wall. They didn't want let him be tested; I kept fighting it and finally got it done. That's how I became

> involved. I knew that he needed all the help he could get, so it meant me really being involved. I want him to learn as much as he possibly can to his learning ability. - Parent at Porfirio Diaz High School.

Parents feel it is important to understand what is going on at the school and in the classroom, as well as to understand how their children are faring academically. Another parent indicated that she became involved at her daughter's middle school when she recognized that certain things were not being done to her satisfaction.

> They call me the "Watchdog of Francisco Villa." . . . My concern was that if my child is having problems the first day, I want to know right away. If you let me know and I don't care then fine, you have done your job. But if I am, then I can turn that kid around and you wont have to deal with future grief and my child will make a better grade. - Parent at Francisco Villa Middle School

Many of the parents stated that it is their responsibility to ensure the school is doing everything possible for their children. Similarly, parents feel obligated to do whatever they can for their children. In fact, many parents first initiate involvement based on a realization that something is wrong or might go wrong. Thus, in addition to cooperating with the school and ensuring teachers are doing all that they can, parents are also taking part in their children's development. As mentioned above, some parents teach their children to respect themselves and others and to take responsibility for their actions. Others also ensure their adolescents know the value of a dollar and how to behave in public. Further, some parents teach their children about their cultural heritage. According to one group of mothers, the annual Folklorico dancing exhibitions provide a perfect opportunity for sharing their culture. Mothers are involved in sewing costumes, making braids, and decorating. As they perform these activities, they often find themselves telling stories about their family's history and culture. Thus, both formal and informal activities are geared toward the development of their children.

Building and Strengthening Relationships

The building of relationships with other parents and teachers as well as the strengthening of these relationships once established was also identified as an important part of parental involvement. By establishing personal relationships with teachers and other school staff members, such as the parent specialist, as well as by attending meetings and becoming involved in committees, some parents are able to stay "on top of things."

> I want them to call me up and let me know--don't be afraid to call me at home, don't be afraid to call me at work to tell me she [my daughter] is not doing what she should be doing. -Parent from Porfirio Diaz High School

> I want to know why she [my daughter] is not doing well so I get acquainted with the teachers. -Parent from Porfirio Diaz High School

The parents value relationships with teachers because they want to prevent problems from becoming major difficulties. Parents feel their presence is perceived by the teachers as caring. "The teachers know you care." Further, having working relationships with teachers provides opportunities for parents and teachers to interact as a team.

> Teachers are easier to work with when you give them positive feedback. - Parent from Francisco Villa Middle School

One parent indicated that she makes certain her child's teachers know they have her support.

> "I'm here to support you as a teacher" and if [I] do have any problems, or see that there might be a problem, get both sides of the story, not just your child's - Parent from Porfirio Diaz High School

Parents also felt that developing relationships with teachers provides them with an opportunity to demonstrate that they value education. The close working relationships facilitate their efforts to support the school and to stay informed about what activities are taking place at the school. Further, such relationships provide them access to information regarding what their children are learning and what is going on in their children's lives during the day. Being familiar with their children's social group and daily activities is particularly important to parents at the secondary level.

In an effort to describe how important relationships between the home and school are for her, one mother revealed a very personal story. Her daughter, a middle school student, had a traumatic experience at school. This young girl had become so afraid of going to school that she had fainted, gone into convulsions, and had an anxiety attack. The mother had no idea what to do. At first she let her daughter stay home, but she later sought help from the school when a judge threatened to jail her for not meeting the compulsory school laws. The mother has forged a strong partnership with school staff in an effort to help her daughter. She volunteers in the school daily and has made an arrangement with her daughter's teachers and the administration for dealing with the anxiety. When her daughter begins to experience anxiety, she finds her mother, touches her, and then returns to class. While a crisis brought this woman

into the school, she now has a strong sense of belonging and feels that she makes a great contribution to both her daughter's life and the life of the school.

Parents also establish relationships and information networks with other parents. Some of the parents who volunteer at the school use their involvement as opportunities not only to see their children and help the teachers, but also to exchange information and make friends. For example, while cutting out decorations for the school hall way, several mothers were also discussing issues concerning adolescent development and child rearing. For Spanish speaking parents, there is another advantage to having a parent network. These networks provide them with access to bilingual persons who can translate rather than simply relay information to them.

In sum, participation is seen as a means for nurturing relationships with the different people who parents perceived could help their children do well in school. Relationships with teachers improve communication and ensure that parents have access to information regarding their children, and relationships with other parents provide them with access to information about adolescent development, school and community events, and other important facts.

Enhancing the School Environment

Parents stressed the positive effects they can have on the school environment. For example, a group of middle school volunteers described their involvement as an important contribution to keeping the school halls orderly and safer for students because they are "extra eyes" for teachers. Their presence in the school halls and cafeteria also allowed them the opportunity to get to know the students enrolled in the school. These parents consider their involvement at the school as contributing to the creation of a safer learning environments for students.

The school environment is also an important factor in encouraging parental involvement. Parents mentioned that a key to creating a welcoming environment is having school personnel acknowledge parents' presence when they are on campus, walking down the halls, or monitoring the cafeteria. For example, parents spoke about how pleasant it feels to have school staff greet them and introduce them to others.

> They make time to greet you and it makes you feel so much better. - Parent at Porfirio Diaz High School

Schools that have developed effective relations with parents acknowledge their presence and work, treat them respectfully, and make them feel at home.

Another important contribution of a welcoming and safe school environment involves the schools' sensitivity to the circumstances of non-English speakers. Several mothers described how the cultural environment changes for them at school when only English is spoken. The fear that no one will

understand them is related to the larger context for these mothers: a bureaucracy that we ourselves hardly understand, school buildings that sometimes house over a thousand children and are by necessity large physical structures, teachers that may or may not acknowledge or greet them, and school offices that often have an officious nature. In those schools where efforts to build relationships with parents are well developed, school staffs have attempted to create parent-friendly environments, and non-English speaking parents have supportive communication networks to exchange information and develop social relationships.

Overall, the parents spoke positively of schools and described feeling part of the staff, being greeted and acknowledged by everyone, having their concerns listened to, and communicating well with everyone. The schools are seen as places where they can seek support and assistance, where people are amiable and approachable, and smiles, a sense of humor, and an openness to their participation are appreciated. Parent involvement in the school seems to both support and depend upon this environment.

Maintaining relationships between parents and their children

Parental involvement decreases dramatically as students move from elementary through secondary school. Several factors contribute to this decline. For example, the number of teachers per child increases making it difficult for parents to stay abreast of each of their child's classes. Similarly, the number of students per teacher increases dramatically, making it difficult for teachers to reach out to each individual parent. Thus, opportunities for informal encounters decrease as students moved into the upper grades, due to both structural and social constraints. According to one teacher, "it becomes harder because each teacher has so many students to keep up with. It is harder to get to know the families."

Parents at the high school level often expressed disappointment in not being involved to the same degree and with equal enthusiasm at the high school as had been their experience at the elementary school. One of the reasons given for decreased levels of interaction between parents and teachers was the lack of opportunity available to parents of secondary students to become meaningful involved. They asserted that parental involvement activities should be designed that allowed increased interaction between the home and school. Parents also communicated a desire for a clearly defined purpose for coming to school. As one mother put it: "parents want a mission." "Just tell us what we can do." They argued that a lack of purpose for organizations such as the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and parental involvement in general contributes to low attendance and involvement.

> The PTA does not have a purpose. I am here a great deal. I have a reason to be here. I am a member of site-based, and I am a member of the gifted parents PTA. But I don't feel like it matters. It doesn't' feel meaningful. - Mother from Madero Middle School

Another mother agreed. She feels that she is at school a lot but does not feel as if her presence makes much difference. She knows her daughter's teachers and, thus, is able to keep up with her daughter's progress, but she often feels she should be doing more. The two women together argued that many parents do not come to school because they are uncomfortable being there without a purpose. These parents seemed to be saying that if teachers and school people could provide a mission or a reason for coming to school, more would come.

> You have to give them [parents] an idea of what they can do. They aren't just going to come to school. There has to be a purpose. This is especially true for working parents who have little free time. You can't just tell your boss "I'm just going to go up to the school." What are you going to do with them once they are here? If you don't know they are gonna ask "why are we here?" Parents don't know what to do. If you would give them a task, they would be here. Personally, I don't know how to help out. - Mother from Madero Middle School

Moreover, students spend more time with peers and less time with family members. Adolescents try to assert themselves as individuals, and social norms typically discourage students from involving parents in their social lives. The parents we spoke to in our study are cognizant of these patterns. They often complain that as children grow older they do not want their parents around. Students tell them they are embarrassed by their parents' presence.[2] One young man told his mother: "Don't come to the classroom. You'll embarrass me." Thus, maintaining relationships is not always easy for parents. In fact, some adolescents shirk the attention that parents endeavor and are encouraged to provide:

> My daughter gets irritated with my involvement: why do you have to ask so many question? Why do you have to know what I am doing? Why do I have to show you my work? - Mother from Porfirio Diaz High School

Additionally, as students get older they often discourage their parents from having any contact with the school. Teachers report that students often fail to give their parents notes that they have sent home and phone messages that they have left.

> A lot of parents complain that their kids tell them that they don't have homework when they really do, but there is really no way to tell. - Teacher at Francisco Villa Middle School

---

[2] It was asserted that this was more of a problem for parents who were not very involved when their children were younger.

According to one teacher, when parents are alienated from the school or have infrequent contact, students are more likely to manipulate the situation.

> The thing is that they don't want their parents to, in my opinion, come in until its something that they don't like--then they want the parents to come in and confront the teacher. . . if they feel that the teacher's riding them, [they will say] "oh, mom's going to be here tomorrow. I'm going to make her come and talk to so and so."

In other words, students use the adults to their advantage and the less information either group has of what is going on, the more easily information can become manipulated. The teacher, quoted above, believes that relationships between parents and teachers serve as a check on student achievement and behavior. Interestingly, one group of parents and teachers indicated that this is more of a problem for boys than for girls. One mother from Madero Middle School made the following comment: "They have an image to keep up." Also, parent presence at the school is often associated with "being in trouble," providing adolescents with yet another reason to discourage parents from coming to school.

> "Mom, they told me you came to the school. What was the problem? Why did you come?" It had nothing to do with you, I would say. - Mother from Porfirio Diaz High School

This parent realized that her daughter was associating her presence with being in trouble. To combat this misconception, the parent talked to her daughter about it and now attempts to be at school and visible as much as possible.

Unlike many of the other parents, one parent stated that while her son protests verbally to her persistent presence at the school, that he actually likes having her around.

> My son sees me more at school and he's at the point where he is embarrassed to be seen around me. He wants to be independent. However, he likes to see me here and the other kids like to see me as well, and I think indirectly he likes that I am here because then I can see what he is doing. - Mother from Francisco Villa Middle School

The decrease in involvement at the secondary level is felt to be problematic by some. It was noted that the higher grades might be where involvement is most needed. Parents and teachers seem concerned about the multitude of adversities that many adolescents face. It was asserted that students who are supported by their family will be much better able to cope during this difficult time in their lives. Thus, many parents described struggling to find avenues for being present in the lives of their children. Some parents volunteer at the school, some are involved in community activities with their children (e.g.,

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

church), and others attend all of their children's extracurricular events. One mother explained: "When she sees me at her games, when she sees me going to open house, when I attend her Interscholastic League contests, she knows I am interested in her activities. Plus, we have more to talk about. See?" Parents whose children are involved in school activities and organizations tend to be more involved than other parents. Their children's activities provide avenues for parents to maintain relationships with them--avenues they believe their teenagers feel are acceptable. Thus, encouraging students to become engaged and supporting their efforts were considered substantial aspects of parental involvement in these schools.

Being Good Role Models

Providing positive role models was also proffered as an important involvement activity. Several parents stated that teenagers have too few good role models and that it is their responsibility to be upstanding citizens and to show, through their actions, that education is important.

> I've tried to instill in my kids that education is very important. I want to see them go onto college. And you know, uh, that's the reason I'm here for them. So, well, basically, that's why - Porfirio Diaz High School Parent

They consider doing volunteer work and participating in organizations such as PTA and Booster clubs and committees such as Site-Based Decision Making (SBDM) teams and Parent Advisory Committees (PAC) as important ways to model the value of school, the value of being a lifelong learner, and the value of struggling. For example, not knowing English but working in a school is viewed by at least one mother as a way of modeling for her children the importance of overcoming barriers.

> I know my English is not so good--getting better--but I come up here and I work. Working is important. I want my son to be a hard worker too. - Mother from Benito Juarez Middle School

As indicated previously, this modeling is often done in the face of teen resistance. Regardless, the parents we spoke to felt that students benefited from their involvement in terms of motivation and realization--"opening their eyes" to the importance of education.

Benefits to Parents Personally

A final and highly relevant reason for being and staying involved concerns the benefits that parents themselves gain from the experience. All the participants related how much enjoyment they experience from their volunteer work. They meet friends, enjoy the camaraderie of the teachers, feel pleased about

the help they provide their children, and enjoy having access to information. Parents described the following benefits: developing new friendships, building teacher and parent relationships, gaining support from others, developing interpersonal skills, acquiring typing skills, increasing their self-confidence and self-respect, improving communication and English skills, and accessing information. In other words, these parents experience tremendous personal growth.

Parents shared stories of learning to type, developing the ability and courage to answer the telephone in English, and developing supportive relationships with each other.

> Besides making friendships that I have here with teachers and parents. I reach out to parents who do not come to school frequently. . . . I try to build trust with the parents so that they will open up to us about personal issues so that we can help them. I help by listening and acting on the part of other parents. - Parent from Porfirio Diaz High School

Another mother told us that before she began volunteering at the school, she thought she had no talents. However, her free-hand drawings and posters earned her praise from both parents and teachers. She revealed that this boosted her ego so much that she is less shy about other things as well. The new skills parents learn are often used to help their own children. For example, knowing the library or typing are skills they use to assist their children write better reports or turn in more polished products. Two of the parents told of buying used typewriters in order to practice their new typing skills at home.

Finding that other parents share their struggles regarding access to information, parenting, and personal growth was also mentioned. Parents discussed learning to recognize that children develop at different rates and to be more realistic with their own expectations. The information they learn about children's behavior and discipline management transfers to the home. They also reported being able to communicate more with their children because they could talk about things that had happened at school, and future events.

Involvement related to personal growth is also evident in their confidence and self-assurance. For example, one mother told us that prior to being involved at school, meetings were intimidating because she did not know the school building and was afraid to get lost. Since she did not know any teachers or parents, attending a meeting was a major ordeal. Similarly, several mothers related the growth in confidence they have experienced since beginning to volunteer at the school. They come to meetings knowing the layout of the building, knowing some teachers and parents, and feeling secure. Thus, these parents not only have more access to information because they are at the school, but they are also more likely to attend a meeting.

The personal benefits that parents gain from being involved are important to the maintenance and growth of parental involvement programs. First, and perhaps foremost, they entice parents to sustain

involvement. Second, the benefits are not entirely personal. The entire school community gains from their friendly and enthusiastic demeanors, from the work they do, and from the support they provide.

Involvement, from the parents point of view, encompassed a wide range of activities and is valued far beyond its potential effect on student achievement. Many parents saw their involvement as a partnership with school staff and other parents as opposed to seeing themselves as solitarily supporting the cognitive and emotional development of their children. This enhanced the overall effectiveness of the parental involvement program and seemed to benefit all who were involved.

School Staff Views

Members of the school staff and specifically teachers agree with the parental views described above in a number of areas. For example, teachers also feel that communication fosters the development of relationships and that the presence of parents on campus improves the school atmosphere. However, the perspectives school staff hold also differ in some substantive areas. They focus on more formal activities in their descriptions of parental involvement. Many suggest that parent involvement is limited to activities such as volunteering in the office, library, or teacher work room, monitoring the school grounds, hall ways, and cafeteria, and supporting teachers when students are behaving inappropriately in the classroom. School staff interpreted parents attendance at functions such as open house, as demonstrating an "I care" attitude. One middle school teacher explained:

> Parental involvement means bringing the parents into the educational process. This could be in the form of participating at school, fundraising, or helping out teachers. Seeing parents in the school makes a big difference. - Teacher from Francisco Villa Middle School

Thus, for many teachers, the level of parental involvement at a school is defined in terms of the absence or presence of parents at formal, school initiated functions like PTA meetings or parent-teacher conferences, or serving in school volunteer capacities, as hall monitors, library support personnel, clerical assistants, or classroom assistants.

> It [parental involvement] includes having parents show up for teacher conferences, having them come up and sit in the classrooms and see what their children are learning, assisting teachers, teaching parents parenting skills. These would be the main components of a parental involvement program. - Counselor at Madero Middle School

Few teachers or administrators feel that parents can be of assistance in the classroom; it is generally believed that parents do not have enough education to assist at this level. The school staff members,

who do believe that parents can be useful in all facets of the school, are either special programs teachers or non-teaching staff. For example, the school librarian at Porfirio Diaz Middle School indicated that she has many activities in which parents could be involved.

> I could really use some parent volunteers. They would help with routine things: checking in books, checking them out, shelving, pasting. . . . We will be start word processing soon, and we need some assistance. Also the accelerated reader program.

Similarly, one of the Special Education teachers at Benito Juarez High School listed numerous ways in which parents can be involved both in and outside the classroom. She asserted:

> In my classroom they take students to the rest room; help with instructional reinforcement both academic and functional areas, they provide role models for them. I have a student who is very low functioning and this parent is there for him. Talks to him. . . . I can think of a thousand ways to involve parents. I now what my students need, and I figure out ways to have them help me. . . . Parents could be beneficial in all classrooms through not in the same ways; they could do so much.

Unlike regular classrooms, special programs teachers and non-teaching staff are able to articulate more clearly how parents can be involved and what roles they can play both within their work environment as well as in the school at large. Similarly, this group is also more likely to be familiar with the home life situations of more parents. Some feel this provides them with a better understanding of involvement patterns and a greater appreciation for informal involvement.

Such an appreciation, however, is not always fostered at the district level. Indeed, one district parent specialist is planning on giving "Campus of the Year" awards for the campus with the most parental involvement. Thus, she is basing parental involvement on the number of clock hours volunteers log at school. No attempt has been made to recognize informal activities. Such a failure may serve to reinforce the school's tendency to focus on formal activities. Regardless, the basic difference between the two definitions (i.e., the definition provided by the majority of parents versus that generally offered by school staff) is that teachers often thought of parents as being involved in the schools whereas parents often thought of it as being involved with their children and the school.

In addition to the different activities identified, teachers, administrators, and parent involvement specialists also perceived a multiplicity of purposes for engaging parents in educational processes. Educational staff considered parental involvement an important way to serve the needs of both the children and the school. Specifically, their rationales include: improving academic achievement,

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

garnering support and assistance, reducing discipline problems, and providing parent and adult education.

Improving Academic Achievement

Parent involvement was also seen as having a positive impact on student achievement. The explanations given for this relationship suggest that the relationship between parental involvement and increased student achievement is indirect. For example, one teacher explained that parents, who attend parent-teacher conferences and keep in touch with the school, are in a better position to monitor their children's progress. Similarly, several teachers reported that communication with parents on a regular basis allows teachers to know where the child is coming from, when things are rocky at home, or if the child is having difficulty understanding something. Having parents around allows teachers to be familiar with the whole child. One teacher explained that knowing about the child and their activities beyond school provides teachers with useful information. Teachers are better able to use examples and activities with which the kids will connect, and s/he can attempt to capitalize on the students extra-curricular strengths. Likewise, several teachers mentioned that if they are familiar with their students' parents, then they are more likely to call them if their children start falling behind.

Several teachers made comments regarding the motivational effect that parental presence at the school has on their students.

> I think having parents in the school has a positive effect on student behavior. They tend to act more like young adults. . . . When parents volunteer in the library, kids have an opportunity to interact with more adults. I think that kids need to interact more with adults.
> - Librarian at Francisco Villa Middle School.

It was also indicated that involvement is instrumental in keeping kids in school. "Some kids get to the point where they aren't interested in class or anything else. . . the parent can show they care." Although none of our informants said parental involvement unambiguously prevented dropping out, many felt that students would be less likely to drop out if one or both of their parents were involved.

Several school sponsored activities are aimed at increasing student achievement and parental involvement. For example, one of the middle schools sponsors a Saturday academy where parents can participate in academic subjects with their children. In order for students to participate they must have a parent or guardian "learning partner." This particular program is highly successful. The academy is filled to capacity each weekend. Another parent-child learning program, the South Texas Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) program, provides opportunities for parents and students to visit NASA and other organizations that use math and science technologies. Madero Middle School's new Communities in

Schools (CIS) program, which focuses on "at-risk" students, endeavors to involve parents in all areas of the lives of their children.

Garnering Support and Assistance

Getting to know parents and gaining their support is viewed as important for a number of reasons. Primary among these is the effect that such relationships have on communication. Communicating and sharing information are considered to be two crucial components of parental involvement. It was indicated that both information and expectations are more easily communicated when parents are part of the school-community. For example, teachers consider parent involvement as an avenue for dispensing information regarding school functions, meetings, classroom events, testing schedules, and individual student progress.

Further, these relationships facilitate two-way communication, an element that is important to mutual understanding. For example, one teacher at Porfirio Diaz High School commented:

> I have found that just having conferences with the parents, especially when you have a student having problems, and you call for a. . . parent-teacher conference. That's when you get to know the parent and what they're doing at home and why it's so hard, that they didn't follow up on them you know, what their child is doing in school.

Parent-teacher conferences were mentioned as effectual means for sharing information.

Second, it is critical in any school change effort to have parents involved, informed and supportive. An administrator at one middle school noted that the information that parents garner on school reform is typically shared more effectively with other parents, and their involvement in initiatives generally leads to support. Parental support is especially important during bond elections and at other times when fund raising is an issue.

While some schools do not have a PTA, in those schools that have them, teachers point to these organizations as good examples of support for the school. For example, at one school, the PTA is raising funds to buy a marquee for the school. The campus leadership requested the marquee to provide another avenue for communicating school information to parents and community members.

School staff members also feel that parental support and assistance are important in the daily operations of the school a well as in the success of special school sponsored activities. Teachers at one school indicated that parents can be relied upon to participate as chaperones on field trips, at athletic events, and at Interscholastic League activities. They also pointed out that parents often donate time, money, and other resources in order to help the school or to support an activity in which their children are involved (e.g., laminating, running off the school newsletter, fundraising, planning or hosting senior graduation celebrations, sewing and decorating for Folklorico dancing, and speaking on career day).

Reducing Discipline Problems

School staff, like many of the parents, are concerned about the drop in involvement as students move through secondary school. The librarian as Francisco Villa Middle School stated: "Parents tend to slack off by the time their children get to this age." She feels this is problematic given the increased amount of peer pressure with which adolescents are confronted. The parent coordinator at this school asserted that the schools were in part responsible for the decline. "District-wide we have a very strong parental involvement program, but it is geared more toward the elementary schools. . . . We are dropping the ball too soon." Regardless of who is responsible, most teachers and administrators feel that the decrease in parental involvement is associated with the increase in behavior problems as students grow older.

Similarly, it was asserted that by increasing parental involvement that behavior problems should be reduced. Both formal and informal activities were mentioned. For example, parents at one high school were asked to monitor the halls during the break between classes. At another school, parents have been asked to act as companions to their children when student behavior is shoddy. Some teachers feel parents are being very supportive of school staff efforts to improve behavior in secondary schools.

> We have asked several parents to shadow kids so far and they have come. The kids of course don't act up with their parents following them around, but their parents know that isn't the point. -Teacher at Madero Middle School

Teachers also mentioned the benefit of having parents reinforce the discipline standards of the school at home. Similarly, they recognize the important role that imparting values such as "el respecto" plays when children come to school. It is felt that those children whose parents' stressed respect and who reinforced a sense of responsibility at home, were better behaved at school.

> I think they demand that their children are going to respect their elders which is what my parents brought me up with - Teacher at Porfirio Diaz High School.

Some forms of involvement automatically involve student behavioral elements. For example, annual Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) meetings, for students in special education, require a discussion of student behavior. Similarly, at Madero Middle School parents attend conferences with team members, at which time, academic progress and behavior are discussed. The teams involve the parent, the student, and the teachers in developing behavior management programs, if such a program is necessary.

Providing Parent and Adult Education

A final area of parental involvement that was frequently mentioned by members of various school staffs was parent and /or adult education. Parent education includes lessons on parenting skills as well as seminars on new school programs. Alternately, adult education includes Graduation Equivalency Diploma (GED) courses, English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, computer training, typing or sewing classes, etc.

At one middle school, the assistant principal indicated that parent education is needed in order for parents to understand how schools have changed, what is expected from their children (e.g., behavior, dress, attitude, and work), as well as how to be school advocates. Similarly, several teachers mentioned the importance of parents understanding the school's curriculum, the importance of and reasons for standardized testing, and the way that standards in the different content areas have changed. For example, a math teacher at one middle school stated

> It might be good to have inservice for parents to look at curriculum so that they know that we are teaching. Parental involvement lets parents know what we do in math. Some parents are afraid of math and this rubs off. We want them to understand.

Many of the schools have PACs or other groups or programs that are required or supported by the federal government. Parent education is usually a required component of these programs. Several parent specialists work to adapt the lessons as much as possible to the needs of the parents. Two, in particular, mentioned sending out surveys to obtain parental advice on topics they wanted to have covered. "We don't want to waste their time."

A number of the schools and/or their districts offered adult education classes. Parent specialists considered the development of parents skills and self-confidence as an important aspect of involving parents. Typically classes like key boarding, sewing and arts and crafts were offered. In some districts, parents also had access to GED courses, ESL classes, and driver education courses.

Overall, staff members viewed parent and adult education favorably. Some felt that increased parental knowledge would allow them to become better parents. Similarly, others indicated that it showed children that their parents valued education enough to be life long learner.

Involvement, from the perspective of school staff, contains both formal and informal activities. Of which, the formal activities are valued more often and to a higher degree. Most school staff value involvement activities that facilitate their work (i.e., educating). Teachers, unlike parents, are less likely to describe parental involvement as a relationship and rarely mention any intrinsic benefits of involvement. However, most informants feel that parental involvement is important and that they do what they can to support it. In the section that follows, the strategies that school staffs employ to sustain and develop parental involvement will be discussed.

Best Practices for Building Collaborative Relationships Between Parents and Schools

The primary purpose of this study was to identify those practices that participants feel are most effective in developing and sustaining meaningful parental involvement. It is difficult to make broad generalizations regarding what can be described as best practices. Each campus is situated in a distinctly different historical, political, economic, and educational context, is responding to localized needs, and interacts and responds to environmental and organizational changes differently.[3] However, at each of the schools it is apparent that seven particular elements contribute substantially. These include: 1) fostering communication and information exchange, 2) teaming teachers, 3) maintaining a parent-friendly school environment, 4) establishing parent centers and providing parent coordinators, 5) engaging students and inviting parents, 6) providing more opportunities for parental involvement, and 7) building on Mexican-American culture, values and experiences.

Fostering Communication and Information Exchange

As mentioned previously, parents and teachers regard communication as critical to building relationships between parents and teachers, to keeping track of student progress, and to exchanging information. All of the schools were continually attempting to find more effective means for improving communication. Phone calls are listed as the major means for communication. Teachers reported calling parents to inform them not only of academic progress and discipline issues, but to invite parents to school events or activities that might be of interest to them.

In addition to phone calling and sending notes home, certain schools are using less traditional routes to advertise activities and events and to provide information. Three are using local newspapers to announce upcoming events and have found this to be an effective strategy for increasing attendance. Several have also designed and now publish parent newsletters and monthly calendars that they mail home. The principal at one middle school was reported to carry around extra copies of their newsletter and hands them out randomly to parents, in an attempt to ensure that they all receive them. Two school districts are planning to install a service called the parent connection. This is a phone service through which parents or student can access information about tests, assignments, events, etc. One school has even begun using a local television channel to inform the public of upcoming events.

At the beginning of each school year, most of the secondary schools reported giving out parent-student handbooks. These handbooks contain information such as teachers' names, their teams, classroom numbers, class schedules, as well as school and district rules and regulations. These books are provided in both Spanish and English. At one middle school, three days are set aside at the beginning of

---

[3] As previously noted, these findings are based on the perceptions of parents and school staff who are engaged in a relationship building role or capacity and does not include the views of all parents.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

the year during which meetings are held in English and Spanish to explain the contents of the handbook and to answer parent questions. Open house, a traditional strategy for having parents come to the school to view their children's work and meet their teachers, are handled differently in some of the secondary schools. For example, Francisco Villa Middle School holds two open houses per year. During these events, report cards are given out by the home room teachers or the academic team.

Parents reported that the innovations schools have implemented are making a difference. The most effective strategies, however, are those that involve personal contact. One of the most effective ways to communicate information, to nurture a caring environment, to gain parents' trust, and to overcome parental fears related to their limited English proficiency or less developed formal education is the use of personal communication and contact by school staff. This is a frequent practice of teachers and parent specialists, calling parents, visiting them, or speaking to them individually when they are on the campus. Parents spoke of being "invited" to join a committee, to contribute a talent to the school, to provide assistance during an event, or to attend a meeting.

Given the importance parents place on personal contact, the role of body language must not be overlooked. Many parents shared that they would not feel comfortable working with teachers who exhibit "*una mala cara*" (an ugly face or disposition). Fortunately, in these schools, teachers communicated a welcoming and approachable demeanor with parents. Parents also reported that when the educational staff communicated respect and integrity, in the way they greet them and listen to their concerns, they tend to provide more information then they might have otherwise, and they are motivated to continue their involvement with the school. Knowing they can have their questions answered or their concerns heard by a teacher, parent specialists, or counselor makes parents feel they can trust the school.

At all the school sites, schools were extending their efforts to communicate and provide information to all parents, teachers, and the surrounding community. It is imperative that parents and school staff understand the vital roles access to information and communication play in forging collaborative relationships with borderland parents. For instance, it is important for teachers to know what parents perceive their responsibilities to be with respect to their involvement with their children's education and vice-versa. Two-way positive and proactive communication is necessary to the development of effective parental involvement programs.

Teaming Teachers

Academic teams are comprised of a group of teachers from different disciplines who all teach the same group of students. Teaming facilitates planning academic programs and activities for these students, but the benefits do not stop there. Another benefit is having a group of teachers teach and share information about the same child. This allows parents a cross-disciplinary overview of their child's academic progress and behavior. Teaming was highlighted by several teachers and parents as an important element in the home-school relationship. Teaming allows teachers to make contact with and get

to know many more parents, and it allows them to develop a fuller understanding of their students. For parents, teaming means fewer and more productive parent-teacher conferences. In addition to discussing academic progress, topics of study, examinations, and activities in which the child is or will be engaged, team meetings also provide an opportunity to discuss concerns and develop strategies.

Teaming also facilitates more frequent contact with parents. According to one teacher, teams schedule annual meetings with each parent, and if a parent wishes, other meetings can also be scheduled. One team member reported that two teachers in her team are in charge of making phone calls This allows the team to make sure that parents know when students are having difficulty as well as when they have done something outstanding. In short, these large secondary schools are finding ways to provide a closer and more communal environment by consolidating through academic teams. The results of this effort thus far have been positive in terms of parental involvement.

Maintaining a Parent-Friendly School Environment

School climate was considered to be a deciding factor in parental willingness to become and remain formally involved. At least two of the schools are perceived as going out of their way to make parents feel comfortable and part of the school community. Parents at these schools referred to being part of the school family, and described visiting the school as a pleasure.

The responsibility of creating this warm environment is assumed by everyone in the school. Several school staff members discussed how they attempt to make parents feel welcome and appreciated. The parent specialist at Francisco Villa Middle School makes certain that parents know their support is appreciated. She organizes award ceremonies and provides them with pins and vests that identify them as important "staff." Parents at this school are awarded for their involvement and diligence.

Other school staff described attempts to get to know parents as individuals. In an effort to make limited English proficient parents more comfortable, the staff at several schools have made certain that at least one of the office assistants are bilingual, that the Spanish language is used in some hallway displays, and that all school correspondence is printed in both Spanish and English. Others reported that some parent activities are scheduled at night and on the weekends in order that more parents can attend. For example, at Francisco Villa Middle School a Saturday Academy provides an opportunity for parents and students to work together on interesting academic activities. Team meetings and team parent conferences are also scheduled in the evenings at this school. Treating parents courteously, acknowledging their presence and thanking them for their hard work are all considered important in the development of parent-friendly school environments.

Establishing Parent Centers and Providing Parent Coordinators

At the secondary level, all but one of the focus schools have parenting centers. Parent centers provide a place for volunteers and visitors to feel at home. At Francisco Villa Middle School, the parent

center is viewed as a supportive place for parents to meet and develop their confidence. Parents are able to meet informally, have coffee, discuss their children, successes, and problems, work on projects, and help teachers with various tasks. The only secondary school without a parent center, Porfirio Diaz High School, did have an efficacious Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO). Parents from this school feel the PTO provides them with many of the advantages that other parents attributed to parent centers.

For those schools with parent centers, its location is an important consideration. The proximity of parent centers to other areas of the school affects the amount of personal contact taking place between parents and school staff. At Francisco Villa Middle School, the parenting center is located in an alcove outside the main flow of the school. This makes chance encounters unlikely and lessens the visibility of parents at the school. This was demonstrated in several teacher interviews from this school. These teachers were unaware of the amount of time that the parent volunteers spend at the school and what they do while they are there. The librarian at this school indicated that when the parent center was located in one of the library rooms, she knew more of them and had more volunteers in the library. Thus, location is an important factor.

The provision of parent coordinators also contributes to the effectiveness of parental involvement at these schools. These women are members of the local community, and serve as a liaison between the school and community for many families. Their links to the community are particularly useful to school teachers and administrators in terms of communication. Further, parent coordinators organize volunteers, plan activities and events, and run parental involvement programs. These women also serve as informational resources for parents and often times as friends as well.

Engaging Students and Inviting Parents

Parents whose students are engaged, whether in scholastic, artistic, musical, or athletic activities, seem to have higher levels of involvement than those parents whose children are unengaged in school beyond attending class. Student engagement seems to facilitate both formal and informal involvement activities. For example, at Madero Middle School two mothers were interviewed whose daughters are intensely engaged in school. Both are in the gifted and talented program, are members of school clubs, and one is a cheerleader. These parents are in contact with the school on a weekly basis if not more. One of them is a member of a number of school committees. Similarly, several teachers mentioned that the parents of athletes are often involved in the Booster club and attend their children's games and award ceremonies.

Several schools have responded to this connection by organizing student performances to precede meetings at which parents are the invited audience or participants. One act plays, choral or band performances, science fair displays are some of the attractions. It is felt that such activities provide avenues for students to show off their talents for their peers and parents, for parents to see what is going on at the school, and for school staff to provide information to or solicit information or ideas from their

parent community. These activities are supported or associated in some way with the school, and they provide opportunities for parents to demonstrate their interest in and concern for their children. Moreover, they allow parents an opportunity to connect with an age group that tends to reject parental attention.

However, it is difficult to ascertain the direction of this relationship. That is, which comes first, student engagement or parental involvement? Or is the relationship more dynamic? Does the engagement of students send a message to parents that the school is taking an interest in their child? Or do students become interested in school activities because their parents are involved? Can it work both ways? While these questions remain unanswered in this research, it does appear that when students are involved, parents have a reason to cross the school threshold and link into their children's social and academic activities.

Providing More Opportunities for Parent Involvement

Parental involvement does not have to decrease, nor should it, after the sixth grade. Although school structures change from child centered to subject matter oriented, the importance of parents in supporting the education of their children remains as before. Thus, efforts must be made to encourage parents to sustain their informal involvement and to provide more opportunities for formal involvement. In the schools we studied, parents expressed a wide range of interests and named a number of talents from which their school could benefit. Staff members at Madero Middle School recognized this untapped pool of talent and are attempting to capitalize on it. The teachers surveyed parents and then brainstormed ways in which parent interests and abilities could be used in the school. Once designed, activities or "learning opportunities" were introduced to the parents for their thoughts, and objectives and roles were defined. Another strategy for combating the decline in involvement as students grow older has been developed by Porfirio Diaz's district office. They call their program "Volunteers in Place." It provides training to parents concerning involvement in the early grades and encourages participation throughout their child's education. The same district is entertaining the idea of providing staff development training to teachers in the upper grades regarding how to use parents.

Parents reported that activities that create shared experiences for them and their children are important ways of strengthening family communication. Francisco Villa Middle School has added a number of new activities that provided opportunities for shared family experiences. One example is their Saturday Academy, which engages students and their learning partners (typically parents or other family members) in academic activities. Another example is the STEM program activities, which include field trips and math and science projects. At Huerta Junior High, the school has invited a local University to run a mother-daughter program. This school has also developed an active parent center. The mothers who frequent the center volunteer in classrooms, the library, and the office, and they provide the more

traditional services such as copying, cutting and laminating. These women also design their own projects and involvement activities.

Among professional staff, however, there are differences in opinion regarding how to bring about meaningful parental involvement. Some staff tended to think of parent involvement as a parent responsibility to be initiated by parents, rather than as a collaborative responsibility of the entire school community.

> It would be nice if parents would initiate involvement more often rather than having the teachers always having to contact them. - Teacher at Francisco Villa Middle School.

> Parents should keep in touch with teachers and see what they might need. If they say there is nothing, push a little bit. - Librarian at Francisco Villa Middle School

Conversely, others feel that the school should advocate for parent involvement by providing parents with opportunities to become involved in activities they find interesting. In general, the parent coordinator is in charge of parent involvement. The more effective strategies, however, involve both parents and school staff working together for increased parental involvement.

Building on Mexican-American Culture, Values, and Experiences.

Mexican-American cultural values are dynamic and dependent on factors such as place of birth, regional differences, acculturation stages, social class, educational levels, and personal experiences in the mainstream culture. Understanding key cultural values and recognizing the diversity of experiences was identified as an important determining factor to fostering collaborative relationships between schools and parents. It is important to recall that although the majority of the parents interviewed for the study was composed of Spanish-speaking women, there was great diversity in their educational levels, length of time living in the community, class status, child rearing philosophy, and English proficiency.

In developing collaborative relationships with parents, schools endeavor to build on the sense of extended family that many of the mothers talked about. A family oriented climate in some schools is achieved through extending personal invitations to parents, by providing parent centers where mothers can meet informally, and by planning infrequent morning breakfasts where the principal and/or teachers chat informally with parents over "cafe y pan dulce." Personal contact is valued in the Mexican-American culture. Therefore, teachers from several schools make efforts to personally greet parents and students. These and other teachers recognize that for the borderland parents a personal note, phone call, and/or personal invitation communicate respect, warmth, value and a sense of belonging.

Facilitating parent-child communication and interaction is another culturally relevant practice. Often, parents and children are struggling to find common ground in the painful process of acculturation and/or

childhood maturation. Rather than the school setting acting as a catalyst for irreversible separation from home values and mores, it becomes a place for parents and children to interact and provides a basis for continued dialogue at home.

Conclusions

This study examined the nature of parental involvement at the secondary level in borderland schools. It was found that parental involvement is viewed differently by parents and school staff and that the different views affected both definitions of and reasons for involvement. In addition to describing these perspectives, this study also provided seven practices, identified by parents and school staff, that are believed to support parental involvement. While the study was exploratory in nature, we believe it provides educators with a working model of effective practices for increasing the involvement of Mexican-American parents in their children's education at the secondary level. The seven best practices can be thought of as general recommendations for program development.

The findings that emerged from the study contribute to the literature in several significant ways. Some findings support or build on the parental involvement research base and others provide new insight. For example, the findings in this study support the literature that argues that barriers exist that hinder parental involvement (Cummins, 1986; Epstein & Becker, 1982), that information is important (Calabrese, 1990; Epstein, 1986), that parental involvement decreases as students grow older (Villanueva & Hubbard, 1994), and that both formal and informal involvement activities are important and should be supported (Lightfoot, 1978). In these areas, our report offers further confirmation.

This study also makes contributions to the literature. The first of these is the focus on secondary schools that serve primarily Mexican-American students and families. Second, we attempted to provide concrete examples of practices that are used by these schools in addition to relaying informants' comments. We have tried to provide not only things to think about but also examples to learn from.

Third, while "El respecto" has been documented as an important Mexican-American cultural value (Marín & Marín, 1991), it has not been directly linked to social class in the parental involvement literature. The findings in this study suggest that schools that successfully engage parents in their children's educational process, also link "respecto" with involvement. That is, staff members from successful schools treat parents and students with respect, and they support parental efforts to teach this value to their children. Further, paying "respecto" to persons who are typically marginalized and less socially visible is a powerful factor for encouraging involvement. The parental involvement literature has identified "respect" as important but has not linked it with the visibility it creates for marginalized parents.

Fourth, the literature stressed achievement as the key reason for increasing parental involvement (Henderson, 1987). However, borderland parents equally stressed (sometimes more so) the opportunity for forging relationships and developing personal efficacy. For example, some parents purposefully sought involvement in order to establish a relationship with their children's teachers and other parents.

These relationships provide parents with important information with which they can better support their children, and they contribute to the development of parental efficacy.

Fifth, the findings of this study illuminate the importance of personal contact. Teachers, parents, parent specialists, counselors, and administrators stressed the value of personal contact. Although the literature has identified helpful considerations, such as communicating in the parents' dominant language and providing newsletters, in the borderland context, personalized communication was identified as critical. Parents reported that it makes them feel valued and respected. Consequently, effective schools responded by making personal phone calls, making efforts to issue "personal invitations," and in some cases, conducting occasional home visits.

Sixth, a number of studies have shown the benefit of engaging students in school activities. Increased motivation, achievement, and trust have been linked to the engagement of students in "extracurricular" activities (Banks, 1988; Comer, 1988). However, our findings suggest that engagement in school activities may also be beneficial for increasing parental involvement. Our research suggests that if we could capitalize and build on the less formal, more frequent involvement activities, we might be able to increase parental involvement with their children and with the schools.

Finally, this study emphasizes that the cultural diversity of the school community cannot be ignored in efforts to develop parental involvement programs. The schools we studied recognized the importance of culture and included culturally sensitive practices in their parental involvement initiatives. Similarly, although we did not discuss this earlier our findings suggest that parental level of English proficiency and social class are also related to involvement. For example, depending on their class and language ability, some parents have higher status and more meaningful roles than others. Our observations indicate that English dominant parents participate as PTA officers, club leaders, or on the site based decision team, while limited English proficient parents are more likely to be found in the parent center making copies. The need to provide Spanish dominant speakers with avenues to formal decision making entities is evident. This current arrangement unintentionally supports the high status of English speakers and marginalizes parents who do not speak the dominant language.

Although this study was exploratory in nature, we hope that the findings will guide further research. More research is needed on the nature of parental involvement in secondary schools. The dynamics of the parent-school relationship are so different from elementary schools, that the abundance of research on elementary parental involvement is of little use to program planners and implementors at the secondary level. Further, more research is needed on non-majority populations. The characteristics and influence of culture and class on parental involvement should be further explored. Finally, the best practices provided herein also need to be examined in greater depth so that educators can understand them more fully and apply them in appropriate contexts.

Several general themes and issues have emerged during this research project. These themes have implications for program development. Broad generalizations regarding the best practices for

involving Mexican-American parents in school have been made. However, program planners and implementors must take care in how these generalizations are used. Each must be applied differentially (or not at all depending on the unique characteristics of the school setting. As Miles and Huberman (1984) suggest best practices are useful foremost as general guidelines. They can assist practitioners in making sense out of their particular context. It is the context that should drive the design for educational change.

References

Anderson, M. (1993). Studying across difference: Race, class, and gender in qualitative research. In J. Stanfield & R. Dennis (Eds.), Race and ethnicity in research methods. Newbury Park: SAGE.

Baker, C. D. (1983). A 'second look' at interviews with adolescents. Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 12, 501-519.

Banks, J. A. (1988). Multiethnic education. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. K. (1992). Qualitative research for education. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Calabrese, R. (1990). The structure of schooling and minority drop-out rates. The Clearing House, 61(7), 325-328.

Comer, J. P. (1988). Educating poor minority children. Scientific American, 259(5), 2-8.

Cummins, J. (1986). Empowering minority students: A framework for intervention. Harvard Educational Review, 56(1), 18-36.

Epstein, J. (1986). Parents' reactions to teacher practices of parent involvement. The Elementary School Journal, 86, 277-293.

Epstein, J., & Becker, H. (1982, November). Teacher reported practices of parent involvement: Problems and possibilities. Elementary School Journal, 83, 103-113.

Henderson, A. (1987). The evidence continues to grow: Parental involvement improves student achievement. Columbia, MD: National Committee for Citizens in Education.

Lightfoot, S. (1978). Worlds apart: Relationships between families and schools. New York: Basic Books.

Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1985). Naturalistic inquiry. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.

Marín, G., & Marín, B. V. (1991). Research with Hispanic populations. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.

Miles, M., & Huberman, A. M. (1984). Qualitative data analysis: A sourcebook of new methods. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Patton, M. Q. (1990). Qualitative evaluation and research methods. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.

Villanueva, I., & Hubbard, L. (1994, April). Toward redefining parental involvement: Making parents' invisible strategies and cultural practices visible. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Conference, New Orleans.